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As Holidays Approach

Support Important for Bereaved Parents, Families

“When a child has died, it’s important that those around the family not stand idly by wondering what to do, but instead pitch in to help those struggling to survive the normally festive holidays,” suggests Patricia Loder, Executive Director of The Compassionate Friends, the world’s largest self-help bereavement organization.

“Many people distance themselves from a family traumatized by the death of a child. The problem is this compounds the loss and can make the family feel empty, as if no one cares.”

There are many ways friends and relatives can help the family, says Mrs. Loder. But if you simply ask them to call if they need something, that call will likely never come. Here are some ways to help:

- Facing the crowds, holiday music, and general festivities to buy gifts is oftentimes impossible for the newly bereaved. A friend may offer to do the holiday shopping.
- Do specific chores for the family which otherwise might be left undone. Blow the snow from the driveway or offer to address holiday cards. Prepare a special meal and ask for a grocery list so you can shop for the family. Offer to put up holiday decorations, but respect the family’s feelings if they are not in the mood to celebrate this year.
- Figure out a way to incorporate a remembrance of the child during this season. Bring an ornament that reminds you of that child. Collect written memories of the child from friends and relatives and place them in a scrapbook to give as a present.
- Drive the family to an organized memorial service for the bereaved, such as observances held by many of the nearly 600 chapters of The Compassionate Friends. Participate with them in The Worldwide Candle Lighting, held the second Sunday in December each year at 7 p.m., local time.

“The healing that went on this year during our Worldwide Candle Lighting December 8 was tremendous,” recalls Mrs. Loder. “One bereaved mother read of it on our national Web site one hour before it started, found a service nearby, and arrived in time to participate.

“Another mother who lived in an area without a formal service lit her candle with her husband, and then received a call from her father living in a time zone one hour behind hers. They talked, remembering special times they had with her daughter. Nearly an hour later the woman’s father lit his candle. ‘It was a special feeling to be connected in this way while our separate candles burned,’ she told me.”

“Above all,” says Mrs. Loder, “be there to listen, cry with them, and offer a sympathetic ear. And don’t forget the siblings and that there is a reason why they are often termed ‘the forgotten mourners.’ While they may not openly express themselves, this seldom means they are not feeling pain just like their parents.”

The Compassionate Friends has chapters in all 50 states, as well as an estimated 29 countries around the globe. For assistance, call the national office toll-free at 877-969-0010 or visit The Compassionate Friends national Web site at www.compassionatefriends.org.

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